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Naturalist Journeys – Central Florida & Everglades April 20 – 27, 2013 Trip Report

Greg Smith, Guide, with participants Andrea, Penny, Jim & Janine



Saturday, April 20

Arrival in Fort Lauderdale, FL

Everybody arrived in Fort Lauderdale, so we hopped in the van and headed north to Juno Beach. After checking into our hotel we headed off to the Ke'e Grill for dinner, a very nice restaurant that did outstanding cooking and flavoring techniques with their fresh fish. A definite recommendation when any of us return to this area!

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Sunday, April 21 – Juno Beach & Over to Fort Meyers

We started our morning off at Jonathon Dickinson State Park searching for warblers on their migration or any of the other resident species. We weren't disappointed as we had Worm-eating Warbler, Black-throated Blue and others. There were lots of Carolina Wrens and Red-bellied Woodpeckers as we made our way through the different habitats.



We got our first look at a stunning American Swallow-tailed Kite as it careened through the sky alongside our vehicle. We were headed to one more location along the Loxahatchee River (Florida's first river designated under the "Wild & Scenic" law). It was eerily quiet, except for two Northern Cardinals and a single Northern Mockingbird. We decided to head back to our lodging to pick up our bags and head west.

We were heading to Fort Myers and along the way wanted to look for Crested Caracara, Florida Sandhill Crane and Limpkin. We drove along the south side of Lake Okeechobee and took quiet two-lane roads towards Immokalee. We had a number of Crested Caracaras once we got into rangeland. There definitely seemed to be an association with that habitat for these birds.

Next up was an immature Short-tailed Hawk that was perched on top of an old power pole. It gave us long, satisfying looks in the bright afternoon sun.

Next up were three different pair of Florida Sandhill Cranes. One pair was just on the other side of the fence making it so we didn't even need binoculars. We had long, leisurely looks at these birds too.

We had no luck finding a Limpkin on this part of our trip, but we still had lots of days left to find this clam eater. We made it to our lodging at Fort Myers a little late, but definitely in time for a huge Italian feast at Nino's...



We started off early in the morning heading north to the Babcock-Webb Wildlife Management Area. You can take Oil Well Grade road and end up in an area where the Red-cockaded Woodpecker regularly nests in pine cavities. This is also good habitat for Brown-headed Nuthatch and Bachman's Sparrow. Two other birds that regularly use this habitat are the Great-crested Flycatcher and the Red-bellied Woodpecker, both of which were in abundance and very vocal!



It was a beautiful morning with a faint mist rising slowly from the palmettos. The sun was at our back as we parked the van and walked down towards the first of a number of locations where the woodpecker uses natural cavities for nesting. It didn't take long for a female to land about thirty feet from us, and about fifteen feet up in a pine. It peeled flakes of bark off the tree as it searched for insects in hidden crevices. It was successful, and it made it

readily apparent to us how successful this adaptation was!

Next up was a Brown-headed Nuthatch that came that in and worked a tree limb, finally pulling out a pine seed that was lodged in the bark. It was joined by a second bird, that again, gave us really quality looks.



Then we heard our first Bachman's Sparrow calling on both sides of the road. But as soon as we keyed in on one of the birds, it decided to stop singing and disappear before we got to see the bird. That was the last time we heard this sparrow...

We toured the rest of the WMA and got to experience a piece of Florida's wildlands that looked relatively intact. Alligator, Eastern Kingbird, Meadowlark, and Bluebird were all present, as were

calling Northern Bobwhite. This was a very diverse assemblage of resources in a habitat that is fast becoming all too rare in Florida.

After a Panera lunch we headed to the Venice Rookery where the colonial nesters were busy incubating eggs and raising young. Anhinga, egrets, herons and ibis were all busy with their respective responsibilities. Pretty cool to sit in the shade and watch life happen in front of you! And then this four and half year old Bald Eagle landed on a snag next to the viewing platform; that definitely got everything's attention, including us. It shook off the gentle rain and let the harassing crows and grackles dive-bomb at will with no apparent care.

Now for the Florida Scrub-Jay... This species has had its share of bad luck with habitat loss and West Nile virus, but Caspersen Park was supposed to be one where the jay was relatively "easy" to find.

We headed into this Venice park where we had luck in last year's journey finding the jay. We parked and then headed out to the trails. It took a while, but then in the distance we saw that familiar jay shape at the top of a snag. We got closer and the single bird actually flew in closer to us and foraged. It was about twenty feet from us and we all got good looks!

We headed south and stopped in to listen for the sparrow again, but not a peep from them. We finished the drive to our lodging and then headed over to Fancy's for some southern cooking. Chicken and waffles, or maybe shrimp and grits for dinner anyone?



Tuesday, April 23

Corkscrew Swamp & Sanibel

We got an early start and headed over to Corkscrew Sanctuary where we realized there was very little water. We checked with volunteers and they said the drought in this part of Florida had left most of the Sanctuary on the dry side – no waders expected. We did get to see two female Painted Buntings at the feeders, so that was a good start.



The pond and bald cypress in the preserve are looked stunning with their new leaves bursting out in a fine, lime green. Cloaked with Spanish moss and festooned with other Tillandsia, the trees looked graceful with shields of air plants. Cypress are a redwood

relative and were well adapted to having their roots in water and wet soil. Truly a magnificent plant community...



The kites had already finished nesting, which was very different from last year when at the same time they were incubating eggs. Climate change???

There were a few Black-throated Blue Warblers, and loads of Carolina Wren, but birds were scarce this year. A small pool of water for a female alligator and her young were the highlight until the Barred Owl. The volunteers pointed out an adult sitting eight feet off of the ground and about twenty feet off of the trail. Dramatic looks at this ghost of the evening forest.

The volunteers told us if we continued down the boardwalk for another 300m we would be able to see the two down-covered owlets. And there they were! One curiously watching a butterfly hover around it while the other waited patiently for its next meal. You really don't get better looks than this...

After lunch, we headed over the causeway to Sanibel Island. Magnificent Frigatebird, Ruddy Turnstone and Osprey were everywhere. There was a manatee along the shore of Sanibel as we left the causeway and made our way across the island to Ding Darling NWR.

We did a couple of loops around the auto tour route and got to see a number of species. We had a nice mixed shorebird flock, along with a Reddish Egret, a shade loving Blue Heron, lots of Great Egrets and of course the ubiquitous Osprey. The tide was just starting to recede which brought more of the birds out. The secret to Ding Darling is to hit the receding tide as it exposes the feeding areas to the waders and the shorebirds.

Tonight's dinner was at Two Meatballs in the Kitchen. Still a lot of food, good food...

Wednesday, April 24

Tigertail Beach, Fakahatchee & Shark Valley

We wanted to give the sparrow one more try, so we headed back up to Babcock-Webb. It was another gorgeous morning and the usual suspects were up and singing, unfortunately we didn't hear any sparrows. We gave it a good two hours, but not a peep for us...

We stopped at our hotel, picked up our bags and headed down to Tigertail. Unfortunately it was high tide, so the birds were few and far between. But there were those owls in the 'hood...

A drive around Tigertail provided us with up close, easy looks at Burrowing Owls. We took our time looking at four different pairs of these 24/7 owls. Most were perched on boundary sticks or short perches the neighborhood provided. These birds were stars...

It was time to drive through Big Cypress and Fakahatchee Strand on our way to lunch in Everglades City. Alligator was on the list for lunch, along with local fish and a hushpuppy or two. The Oysterhouse provided us with a choice of sautéed or fried 'gator; we ordered sautéed of course. After trying their key lime pie we headed to the docks. The Purple Martin colony was active as numerous pairs went in and out of the two Martin houses. After long looks at these big social flycatchers, we headed up to the highway and on to Shark Valley.





We boarded the last tram of the day at four o'clock and started to work our way around the fourteen mile loop. First bird up was a single Snail Kite followed a couple of miles later by a pair of these mollusk hunters. It was the first time we had seen these birds in this part of the 'Glades. At the

observation tower there was lots of nesting activity with the waders and Anhingas. Adult birds were buzzing in and out trying to keep up with the ravenous appetites of nests full of young. And it was that sweet, afternoon light...

The highlight of the drive back to the VC was the pair of Florida Sandhill Crane with two colts feeding within fifty feet of the tram. We did try to refind the Limpkin that one of us saw earlier, but the ranger was locking the gates and it was time to head on down to Mario's for some very good Cuban food!

Thursday, April 25

Key Largo & Eastern Everglades National Park

We decided to give the closest key a try to see if any passerines had stacked up against the southern tip of Florida. Anything flying in off of the Caribbean would see the Keys as the first piece of land after flying above water for most of the night. If there was a wave, this is where we would find it.

We parked at Dangby Johnson SP and headed in to bird the 2.1-mile loop trail. Well it wasn't dripping birds, but there was enough activity to get us excited. A half-dozen Ovenbirds, a few Black-troated Blue and Blackpoll, Northern Parula, White-eyed Vireo, Black-whiskered Vireo and White-crowned Pigeon. It made us realize that if there were a significant wave what the numbers possibility would be.

Lunch was at Sonny's BBQ before we headed out to Long Pine Key. This was just a little quieter than Key Largo...

After a little siesta we headed back into the Everglades to explore Anhinga Trail. Lots of Anhingas around (not a surprise), and a few herons were really all we could find. Not too busy here on Anhinga, but being there as the sunset was special. It is that calm before the nighttime darkness with all the unexplained noises...

We are going to head out west to see the other side of the Everglades with Flamingo on our mind. But first we wanted to see if there were any changes to the inhabitants of Anhinga. Eastern Kingbirds were busy building their nest in the white mangrove. A lone Least Bittern was sharing its plaintive too-too-too as the alligator crew started to wake and make their way to the center of the pond. But that really was the only thing that we could that had visibly changed from our visit the evening below.



see the two largest reptiles found in North America.

Next we stopped at Paroutis Pond where there was a significant Wood Stork rookery. Mixed in were a number of Roseate Spoonbill, White Ibis and more. Birds were coming and going as we stood and watched the parade. But we had a 10AM appointment with the boat that would take into the back bays of Flamingo.

We boarded the inland waters tour boat wondering what we would see. Our first sighting was four American crocodile along side the edge of the channel. This is the northern most location that this animal occurs in the world. Given we saw American alligators earlier, we were able to

see the two largest reptiles found in North America.



After lunch in the campground we birded the coast and found a nice assortment of shorebirds including a White-rumped Sandpiper. More kites filled the air as we discovered a flock of Black-necked Stilts

on Eco Pond. The Brown-headed Cowbird flock had two male Shiny Cowbirds and we finally caught up with a male Prairie Warbler singing his buzzy trill. But that was about all we had as we headed to Roberts for a tropical fruit shake.

It was decided we wanted more Cuban food as a way to celebrate our farewell dinner. How could you not love a tasty churasco...

Saturday, April 27

Flights Home

It was another gorgeous morning with very few clouds, but that was going to change on Monday. But by then we will all be home as we headed to the airports for our flights...

